

**BUDGET**

Senators Formica and Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Ed Dombroskas and I am here as a volunteer with the Eastern Regional Tourism District which markets under the brand of “**Mystic Country**”. I will explain the volunteer part in a moment.

As an important Connecticut industry that creates jobs and stimulates economic activity by attracting out of state visitors who spend money at our attractions, hotels, restaurants and retail outlets Connecticut is wise to invest in tourism.

The tourism product in Connecticut is diverse with some large and well recognized destinations but also many – many small unique and interesting destinations, lodgings, restaurants, parks, retail outlets and others that together constitute the unique Connecticut tourism product. Think of it as a multi colored quilt that together forms a strong and vibrant industry. Taking this metaphor just one step further, the large colorful pieces in the quilt easily stand out on their own but the smaller pieces struggle for notice and need the embroidery, or in this example the promotion and marketing of the regional tourism district, which pulls it all together. In Connecticut and especially in eastern Connecticut, it is the regional tourism district destination marketing organization that creates in a visitors mind, an interesting destination.

The Eastern Regional Tourism District has proven its effectiveness by leveraging private funds, reaching out to and representing all tourism constituents and maintaining successful and measurable programs. Tourism marketing is a funnel that needs a strong statewide marketing effort to attract attention to the state as a destination which is then supported by an equally strong regional effort providing the details that make a visitors experience enjoyable. The economic success of tourism in eastern Connecticut depends on the ability to bring all constituents, large and small, together in a coordinated approach through the Regional Tourism District.

This past June 30<sup>th</sup> Governor Malloy, abruptly and without warning, suspended all funding to the regional tourism districts. The Board of Directors of the Eastern Regional Tourism District recognized that this action would likely have a severe negative impact on the summer and fall tourism seasons. To mitigate this negative impact the Board directed that all essential services be maintained. These services were paid for by utilizing savings, private funding, cooperative projects and reductions of expenses. At the end of the fall season with resources nearly exhausted all staff was laid off. At that point the Board and staff committed to a plan to maintain three core activities. First, to try to secure funding to continue the work of the District with a history of 35 years of success. Second, to maintain a presence of Mystic Country by continuing to gather destination information and share it through social media and public relations. Third to continue to market Mystic Country at key trade shows by partnering with industry partners, like the Mohegan tribal nation and others, to cover overhead costs. This work is accomplished by volunteer staff, Board members and contributions from industry partners. Clearly this is a stop-gap measure that is not sustainable over time without resources.

Unfortunately at this point we are unable to answer inquiries from prospective visitors considering a visit, cannot fulfill requests for printed materials, cannot coordinate cooperative advertising, cannot provide direction and assistance to wedding and reunion planners and are unable to research and publish consumer promotional brochures like our “ice cream trail” and “pet friendly brochures.

Without our Regional Tourism District funding we will stop collecting information from our tourism businesses and updating content on the new State website, we stop posting on social media, we stop collecting and distributing events listings and responding to editors and press inquiries. No one will answer the phone or emails, no regional trade shows, it all will be gone. The benefits of a tourism economy will no longer be realized.